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The Military's Role in Civil Unrest – A Necessary Evil?

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SYNOPSIS

*Military assistance to civil authority in the Asia-Pacific is not uncommon, and with incidences of civil unrest on the rise, regional militaries might inevitably be called upon to provide support. **SANDEEP SINGH** and **IAN LI** observe that despite the obvious benefits, military involvement in domestic affairs poses a very real threat to civilian control. The decision to employ the military during civil unrests must therefore be approached with caution.*

COMMENTARY

As pandemic-era restrictions start to ease worldwide, the incidences of civil unrest [have begun to rise](#) and the Asia-Pacific is no exception to such trends. Most recently, China's [long-standing zero-COVID strategy](#) sparked strong local protests in late 2022, leading to the lifting of strict COVID-19 policies. When left unchecked, civil unrest can pose a significant security risk, with the potential of escalating violence having an adverse effect on the state's stability.

Given the stakes, there are occasions where the military is inevitably forced to intervene in domestic affairs despite this being a [controversial move](#). By intruding into the civilian domain, the military sets a dangerous precedent by overstepping its traditional mandate of focusing primarily on external threats. This can easily lead to an abuse of power and the erosion of civilian authority. Nonetheless, the military's footprint in domestic affairs in this region is still expected to increase in the near future.

Military Assistance to Civil Authority

Military assistance to civil authority is not uncommon in the Asia-Pacific region because, unlike the West, the [dominant threat perception here was, and still is, internal](#). For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, personnel from the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) [provided assistance](#) by supporting the distribution of medical masks and conducting the contact tracing exercise.

The SAF has traditionally played a very [visible role](#) in addressing domestic threats such as terrorism. In this case, the pandemic was seen as a critical, national-level emergency, which justified the involvement of the military. It also reflected the growing understanding that national security is multi-dimensional – encompassing the military, political, economic, societal, and environmental domains. The SAF's involvement during the pandemic was therefore in line with its core mission of [enhancing Singapore's peace and security](#) and Singapore's broader [Total Defence](#) framework. Likewise, in [Indonesia and the Philippines](#), similar assistance was provided by the military in their pandemic response, albeit with varying degrees of involvement.



The Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) assisted in distributing medical masks and carrying out contact tracing exercises during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the SAF's support was in line with its core mission of enhancing Singapore's peace and security within Singapore's broader Total Defence framework, such military assistance to civil authority elsewhere could bear other unintended consequences. *Image from DVIDS.*

Another reason why the military is so involved in responding to domestic crises is because it is often the [best option available](#). It has a ready pool of manpower and its crisis planning expertise are invaluable assets, particularly in situations where an urgent response is needed. Deploying the military thus proves to be a useful course of action in the case of civil unrest where the situation escalates beyond the ability of local enforcement agencies. Where civil unrest occurs as a result of instigation by a foreign actor, as was the [case with Crimea](#) in 2014, military activation can also be mandated.

Nonetheless, the propensity for abuse and the possibility of civilian casualties means that military involvement in response to civil unrest is often seen as a last resort. One example is the [2013 Little India Riots](#), which was an isolated but significant case of civil unrest in Singapore's recent history where the SAF [did not intervene despite being prepared to do so if necessary](#).

The Problem of Control

While the military within Singapore's context accepts the primacy of civilian leadership, this is not necessarily the case in other parts of the region. In Thailand alone, there

have been 19 coup attempts in 80 years, [12 of which have been successful](#). Military influence is also gaining leverage in [Vietnam's political system](#). The military's uneasy relationship with civilian authority in this region raises questions of accountability and the integrity of civilian-led institutions. When left unchecked, the military ironically becomes [a potential threat to civilians](#). For example, in 2021, the military in Myanmar [returned to power](#) in a coup d'état and, in an attempt to quell public dissent, was responsible for the [violent repression](#) of protestors.

Even when the military is called upon in situations of civil unrest, how and what it does are important questions too. During the [Los Angeles riots in 1992](#) which arose after four Los Angeles policemen were seen to be unfairly acquitted for beating an African-American motorist, 13,000 active duty and National Guard troops were mobilised to maintain order. Subsequently, the marines were also deployed. However, in what remains a controversial incident, the marines fired rounds at [rioters](#) when they were instructed to provide cover for the police. While this was because they had been trained to interpret providing cover in this way, it raised concerns that the military might employ force in a disproportionate manner.

Such concerns also surfaced during the Black Lives Matter riots where US President Donald Trump mobilised active-duty troops [to intervene](#) by quelling protestors and facilitating a controversial photo op of him in front of a local church. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Mike Milley has since [apologised publicly](#) for accompanying Trump while in uniform at the political event as his presence “created a perception of the military involved in domestic politics.”

A Careful Balance

These preceding examples raise three important issues for the military's involvement in civil unrest. The first is how the military might be seen as intervening in domestic political issues and thus partisan in its political alignment. The second is the risk of disproportionate force being applied. Finally, the military might be infringing on the mandate of local agencies such as the police. Trust in the public system is key to effective local enforcement and civil authorities must be allowed to exercise their mandate independently.

The balance between maintaining order and having the military provide support to civil authorities must therefore be carefully calibrated. The military can become easily politicised and in the age of social media, the image of the military may be prone to misinterpretation. That being said, the military remains the most effective option to respond to domestic crises and may well be a necessary evil in future situations of civil unrest.

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